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AUTHOR	Horning, Alice S.
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ABSTRACT

Using reflective writing throughout the composition course yields better reflective writing for composition portfolios. As writing courses make increasing use of portfolios for individual and program assessment, reflective writing will become more and more important. Brief reflective statements of as little as one paragraph, even when done as a last-minute component of a writing task, help students to think about what they have done and how they have done it. Reflective writing seems to have the greatest impact in a first-term course in college writing. In one such course, students write 10 papers, varied in rhetorical mode, with the goals of improving their fluency and self-confidence as writers. They write using 30 prompts, such as "A big problem I had in writing...." Reflective process statements of one-half to one full page are required for each paper, analyzing some aspect of the process used in working on the paper--illustrations from student writing show how they respond. The use of reflective statements yields a number of positive results. First, reflective statements shed important light on the form and content of students' written work. Second, they help students become aware of their preferred approaches to writing, and enable them to take risks to try new and more productive strategies on a particular task. Third, when revising, students may examine their reflections on their earlier process of writing and consider alternative processes or approaches. Fourth, reflective writing produces an intimacy between students and teachers that enables teachers to respond to and to encourage students' growth in writing skill. Lastly, the reflective statements give teachers insights into students' thinking and development not normally accessible otherwise. (CR)

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Reflection and Revision: Intimacy in College Writing

Alice S. Horning
Oakland University

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Using reflective writing throughout the composition course yields better reflective writing for composition portfolios

This year, my assignment for the *CCCC Bibliography* served a more useful function than it generally has, since I stumbled upon an article by Barbara Combs on student self-reflection that I probably would not have known about otherwise. I thought that I was one of just a few people using self-reflection in teaching writing, but I must have had my head under some rock. The Combs article and its citations, as well as the theme of a June, 1996, NCTE conference on reflection, learning and literacy, made clear that I was definitely not one of a select few. As writing courses make increasing use of portfolios for individual and program assessment, reflective writing will become more and more important. Writing teachers can make better use of reflection in final portfolios and during a writing course by guiding students in the use of reflective writing over the whole term. The first-term course in college writing that I have designed, together with the self-reflection prompts I use, and two case studies will show that teachers can see students make significant and qualitatively different progress as writers when students reflect on revision as part of their writing process.

As Combs points out, the growing use of portfolios has increased the use of self-reflection by students to reveal their processes and development. Combs used self-reflection initially to assist her in assessing students' progress and growth. Only over time, with consistent use of reflective writing by students, did Combs come to see its value for the students themselves, in helping them become more independent and aggressive learners (Combs 21). In addition, she developed a strategy to help her students become effective reflectors, by beginning with a structured self-reflection and then moving to a more unstructured kind of response (Combs 23-25).

Ruth Fairchild has made a similar observation in her work with intermediate level college writers as reported at CCCC in San Diego in 1993. Fairchild makes use of what she calls "Dear Ruth" notes on the backs of drafts of student papers when they are submitted. Although her students found these notes difficult at first, they often revealed their own sense of the problems in a draft and made Fairchild's responses more focused and helpful. She says:

> Their internal evaluator tells them it's too brief, not clearly organized, lacking a conclusion or whatever. I need only agree. Then I can spend most of my time helping them progress by making suggestions for solving those problems. (Fairchild 5)

She also asks students for periodic self-evaluations during the term and for a final self-evaluation and introduction to their portfolios at the end of the term. Fairchild finds that students' awareness of the criteria for evaluating writing has increased (10), a key goal in the course she teaches. Her findings are supported by reports from Conway, Hewitt, Rubin, Witherell and Noddings.

Brief reflective statements of as little as one paragraph, even when done as a last-minute component of a writing task, help students to think about what they have done and how they have done it. There are a number of positive results of these reflective statements. First, they shed important light on the form and content of the students' written work, reshaping the evaluation process. Second, they help students become aware of their preferred approaches to writing, and also enable them to take risks to try new and more productive strategies on a particular task. Third, when revising, students may examine their reflections on their earlier process of writing and consider alternative processes or approaches. Fourth, they produce an intimacy between students and teachers that enables teachers to respond to and to encourage students' growth in writing skill (the kind of relationship described by Richard Murphy in *The Calculus of Intimacy*). Finally, the reflective statements give teachers insights into students' thinking and development not normally accessible otherwise. The student cases to be presented here illustrate the potential positive results of reflective writing and the importance of reflection in students' work in revision.

Although I use reflection in all of my writing courses, the one in which it has the greatest impact seems to be the first-term course. Students in this class are typically beginning college students, traditional in age, average in high school performance, and limited in their experience as writers. Perhaps a third or so have taken a "college writing" or other sort of college-prep composition class in high school, but usually, they simply have not had enough experience as writers and so place into the first semester course.

In my version of the course, students write ten papers, varied in rhetorical mode, with the goals of improving their fluency and confidence in themselves as writers. I allow unlimited revision up to a deadline late in the term and give students the best grade they earn on any assignment. Virtually all students choose to revise at least one paper during the term, and many revise more than one. They must meet with me for a conference on any revision they undertake, preferably while they are working on it. A few revise all their assignments up to the deadline, sometimes more than once. All out-of-class papers and all revisions of papers require the submission of a "writing process statement." Here is a sample of the prompts (there are thirty of them altogether, not all produced here in the interest of space):

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With each out-of-class paper, I would like you to provide a thoughtful analysis of some aspect of the process you used in working on the paper. In no more than a page, no less than half (handwritten ok), you should touch on at least one aspect of your efforts addressing points like but not limited to these. I will respond to these statements and they are required (penalty of -1.0 on the paper grade if this statement does not accompany the essay).

1. A big problem I had in writing . . . .
2. My major global shift in this piece is . . . .
3. My biggest risk is . . . .
4. I tried to make the assignment my own by . . . .
5. The audience which I imagined most influenced me in that . . ..
6. My personality did or did not affect a choice I made because . .
7. A paragraph where I was especially aware of pace or syntax . . .
8. Why a good high school senior would not/could not write this.
9. The kind of comment I expect/dread/want is . . . .
10. Class discussion of my draft caused me to . . . .
11. Class discussion of someone else's paper caused me to . . .
12. I tried to respond to your comments on an earlier paper by . . .

I began using a reflective process statement after reading a journal article suggesting it some years ago. This article included the prompts that I use. I have used these prompts to have students provide brief reflective statements on every out of class paper they write, whether draft or revision, and with or without peer review. I can no longer locate the source of these prompts.

Turning to some samples of student work, I want to give two brief examples of process statements submitted by the students and the work they were reflecting on in these statements. The interplay of reflection and revision presents a clear picture of the impact of reflection on writing development. The first case is that of a young man who was a second year freshman student. He was on probation, having run into many difficulties during his first year in school. However, he was also bright and very highly motivated to succeed, and worked extensively on his writing during the term. Here is his first paper of the term, which was an in-class exercise not accompanied by a process statement:

During my many years of education I have molded myself into an educated person, ready to further my learning. Preschool, elementary, and middle school gave me learning fundamentals to help me achieve the proper skills in high school. In this new learning environment, I took in an interest into math, biology, and literature with no problems. Writing has never been my strongest skill. Educating myself through the years, knowing my writing ability is not one hundred percent, inspires me to attack writing as a major goal this term.

When I go about writing a paper, I encounter a few problems. First, I have trouble coming up with ideas about my topic. Elaborating on the topics is another problem I have. Choosing what to say and sentence structure slows me down significantly. Finally, I have difficulty in putting all the information together in a way it will sound smooth and collective.

. . .I have found that having personal guidelines and revision does wonders for me.

Achieving a more confident writing ability is a primary goal this semester. I hope to write smarter and fluently after completing this course. I'd like to overcome the insecurity I feel when writing an essay. I suppose being aware of the weakness makes you stronger already.

Note that he is already aware that revision can help him to be a better writer. He also has a fairly clear sense of where his difficulties lie in writing and what he wants to work on. The paper that proved most challenging for him was paper 3, the description of a process. He chose to write on a topic related to his work in a sporting goods store, in-line skating. Here are his process statements and several drafts of the opening paragraph:

Paper 3, writing process statement

Class discussion of my draft caused me to exclude "equipment" out of the content of my paper. I mentioned equipment in my thesis on the rough draft. I didn't elaborate on that subject in the draft. My paper was long enough and had sufficient information to make it work without the equipment eddition. I also added a summary/ conclusion to end the paper smoothly. I was still shaky about the conclusion.

Paper 3, first draft opening paragraph

One of the fastest growing sports in the world is in-line skating. More and more people can be seen skating around rather that jogging or bicycling. In-line skating is not only a fun activity but actually a good workout too. An average in-line skater will burn 360 calories in a half an hour going at average speeds. Aggressive or freestyle skating is getting more and more creative and spectacular every day. In-line roller hockey is also becoming a giant in today's sports world. There is a place for in-line skating in the life of each individual, provided if everyone knew about the protective gear involved, putting on the skates, skating, stopping and where to go, more people would be apt to give in-line skating a chance.

Paper 3 revision, process statement on intermediate draft

I agreed with comments on Paper 3. I added an additional paragraph about protective gear. I hope this paragraph is sufficient for this paper. I feel this paper will be one of the papers for my portfolio. Opening and Ending feels better.

Final revision, paper 3, opening paragraph

One of the fastest growing sports in the world is in-line skating. More and more people can be seen skating around rather that jogging or bicycling. In-line skating is not only a fun activity but actually a good workout too. An average in-line skater will burn 360 calories in a half an hour going at average speeds. Aggressive or freestyle skating is getting more and more creative and spectacular everyday. In-line roller hockey is also becoming a giant in today's sports world. There is a place for in-line skating in the life of each individual, provided if everyone knew about the protective gear involved, putting on the skates, skating, stopping and where to go, more people would be apt to give in-line skating a chance.

Reflection in paper 10 on his work in paper 3

Paper 3, the process piece, is the first paper of my portfolio. The process piece is about to the steps involved in in-line skating. I explained about the protective gear, putting on the skates, skating, stopping and where to go. My point was that if everyone knew how to in-line skate, more people would be apt to try it. I used the class

revision to my advantage to help me restructure the opening and summary. I started to be confident about my writing in Paper 3 because I feel that my audience understood my instructions and now has an expectation of how to in-line skate.

The main work of this student over the course of his revisions involves fitting together the issues raised in the thesis with the content as it develops in the paper. He found class discussion of drafts quite helpful in making changes to the draft, but also continued to work on it during the term. There is a marked change in tone in his final reflection on this project in his last paper of the term, when compared to his first paper on himself as a writer. Some of strength of the tone comes from his very apt observation that in his work on Paper 3 he "started to be confident" about his writing.

The other case reveals similar progress and development, but in a very different person with different problems and needs. This student was so quiet in class that it was difficult to tell if she was paying attention, much less learning anything. However, her process statements provide an important window through which to view her progress in writing. Here is her opening paper, in which she freely reveals her fears and concerns about writing:

For me when I receive a writing assignment, I get very nervous and a sick feeling in my stomach because I am such a terrible writer. I have never really had a good English or writing class to teach me or help me out in writing papers, so I just try to "wing" my way through it.

When I write a paper I just write what I feel and or know and revise over and over again till I think it sounds decent. When I have somebody else read it, from all their suggestions and comments I usually end up re-writing the whole paper anyway.

. . . Another problem is new paragraphs. I have a pretty good idea about when to start them but where they go is when I get confused. I think it's because I skip around a lot. I'll be writing about one idea and then I'll think of something else so I'll switch ideas and then my whole paper gets messed up because I never really fully finished any of my ideas. I think my major problem is my whole attitude about writing. It is very negative and I don't enjoy it. I know I'll probably never really enjoy writing, but any suggestions that would help make it easier and less stressful and nerve wracking would help.

This student did not engage in much revision during the term, but her process statements tell a great deal about the transformation she experienced during the term:

Paper 2, Process Statement Sheet

I actually kinda enjoyed writing this paper! When we first received the assignment, I was totally clueless as to what to write about, but then I got the idea of a vacation spot that I enjoyed! Not until after I started outlining and jotting all my ideas down, did I realize what a great place it really is. With so many wonderful people and fun things to do how could you not love it!!

I normally have a hard time writing essays, and getting ORGANIZED is a big problem. So it really helped when I mapped all my ideas out first and then outlined them. I could actually see what I was thinking to try to organize it a little better. . . .

Paper 5, Process Sheet

For this paper, I had a hard time trying to think of a topic. It seems like I had a lot of topics, but just not enough ideas to support them. Whenever I would start a certain topic about halfway through I would run out of ideas.

Mapping before I started helped because then I realized what I had to work with. I was able to combine different ideas to expand on certain topics.

Paper 9, Process sheet

I have to admit, that when I was writing my paper, I didn't really put forth my best effort. I already have three papers chosen that I want to use for my portfolio. So I figured that I really didn't need this paper. I mean, I still wrote a paper, but I didn't take as much time or effort that I have on other papers. I don't think it's a TERRIBLE paper, but I know it's not really the greatest either!

There was some confusion in the class discussions so I tried to clean up, but I still needed to work on other problems as well.

In her process statements, she discusses strategies that she already knows and makes good use of to deal with writing tasks. She said little to me in class or conference about her difficulties finding a topic, getting organized, and the other issues she mentions in the process sheets. In the paper 9 statement, she indicates that she is aware of the weaknesses in her presentation, but has enough confidence to hand in this paper even though it is not her best work. The development of her confidence and skill is most clear in her last writing assignment, a discussion of her choices of papers for the portfolio:

When I first learned that I had to take this course, I was very nervous! I was never a very good writer and hated when I received writing assignments. But now, after this class, it's not so terrible anymore!! I can actually receive a writing assignment without becoming sick to my stomach. This class has helped me to gain some confidence in my writing as well. I can actually hold my head up when I turn a paper in and not feel embarrassed when it is returned with a terrible grade. I think that writing a variety of papers has also been very helpful in deciding what to choose for my portfolio. By having the proper instruction, the confidence I needed as encouragement and a variety of papers to choose from, I found it very easy to decide what papers to choose for my portfolio.

. . . Acquiring the proper instruction and being confident about my writing has been very important to me, but having a variety of work to choose from has also become very in completing my comparing all of my work and being able to choose what I thought was the best to hand in for a grade. Out of papers one, two, and three I knew I had to revise one of them because of the poor grades I received. So that was very helpful in making the decision of which one to use because I received a much better grade on my revision than my original. With papers four, five, and six I had a little bit of trouble deciding, but after reading through them and reading your comments, I was able to make my final decision. The hardest part was deciding on papers seven, eight and nine. I pretty much received the same grade on all those so I had to look through them more carefully. Having that variety to choose made my decision making process much more easy and actually enjoyable. I liked looking back at past

papers and seeing my progress throughout the term. I was able to accomplish something positive. . . .

These segments of the final paper suggest that while writing may still not be this student's favorite activity, she is now a skilled and confident writer. She's capable of stating a clear thesis, developing it fully, and summarizing it effectively. Despite her limited interaction with me in class and in conference, and despite her limited work in revision during the term, the process statements and reflections at the beginning and end clearly show her development over the semester.

Richard Murphy points out, in *The Calculus of Intimacy*, how teaching and learning connect with the narratives we get from students engaged in reflection as they write and revise. Murphy describes doing a research paper to use as an example with his students, one on Isaac Newton and his discovery or proposal of calculus. About the ways students and teachers work at learning, Murphy says:

> I think we need an invention like Newton's to allow us to understand teaching. We need a calculus of intimacy. The acts of teaching and learning are dynamic. The area of our work is bounded by lines in motion. At any one moment, it is difficult to plot the curve of our path, to say where we have been or where we are going. I cannot predict what the new calculus would be, but I am reasonably certain that it would not be mathematical. I suspect that it would be closer to narrative, to the story of the self in flux. (9)

Reflection allows us to get close to students in their writing process and changes what happens as they work through a sequence of writing assignments and revisions. They tell us the story of their learning through their reflections on the experience of doing so. Murphy says this is an intimate experience; the cases presented here show that students reveal much of their learning process as they reflect and revise. A neighbor of Murphy's describes reading her son's college papers after his first year, commenting that teachers have "an amazing effect" because her son wrote things he never said anything about, that she didn't know he was thinking. She says teachers get closer than parents, and Murphy agrees that they also get closer than ". . . their lovers. Or their friends. Sometimes it is a deep intimacy, unlike any other, purer than a priest's or a therapist's, less disinterested than either" (Murphy 4). Reflection on writing and revision can enrich both teaching and learning; it allows us this intimacy with students.

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Alice Horning teaches in the Department of Rhetoric, Communication & Journalism at Oakland University, Rochester, MI.